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# Any Other Name( A Documentary Recounting a Chinese Family Saga of Identities Through Generations)

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ANY OTHER NAME: A DOCUMENTARY RECOUNTING A CHINESE FAMILY SAGA  
OF IDENTITY THROUGH GENERATIONS

by

Shuman Deng

B.S., Southeast Missouri State University 2008

A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Science

Department of Mass Communication and Media Arts  
in the Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
December 2011

## RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

Any Other Name: A Documentary Recounting a Chinese Family Saga of Identity  
Through Generations

By  
Shuman Deng

A Research Project Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Science

Approved by:  
Hong Zhou Chair

Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
November 4<sup>th</sup> 2011

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

SHUMAN DENG, for the Master of Science degree in Professional Media and Media Management, presented on November 3rd, 2011, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: ANY OTHER NAME: A DOCUMENTARY RECOUNTING A CHINESE FAMILY SAGA OF IDENTITY THROUGH GENERATIONS

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Hong Zhou

As China's visibility to the world rapidly increases, the perception of Chinese identities is of concern by the Chinese themselves and by the world outside of China in trying to understand this burgeoning global power. The Chinese are very conscientious of how the world views them, and go to great lengths to effect this impression. One group that is representing China's image to the world is the "80 Hou", the post-80's generation that are travelling and studying abroad more than their predecessors. They are unique in Chinese history and are the subject of interest in this research. Within this generation of "80 Hou" is a sub-culture that has become known as the "little emperors". As China's economy grows within the instituted one child policy and this new generation replaces the current leadership the phenomenon of the "little emperors" may have a negative effect on the future of China. Under this context, I made this documentary project in order to document a journey of a young Chinese woman took to discover her old grandfather's forgotten life stories.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In China they have a nickname for today's twenty-something. They call them the "80 Hou". This is the generation born after the inception of China's one-child policy in 1978 and implementation in 1979. The "80 Hou" are unique within the history of China. Economic growth in China coupled with smaller households mean that parents have more disposable income, and social factors have created an environment where that disposable income is spent on the imagined wellbeing and education of their children. Influence from an ever increasingly globalized world has also had an affect on the "80 Hou", pinning them between traditional Chinese communist ideology and individualistic Western-style freedom.

China is currently the world's second largest economy, and the world's fastest growing economy. The "80 Hou" are the first generation to come of age in this new China marketplace. More emphasis is placed on quality higher education, and parents have more ability to afford that education. The "80 Hou" are able to delay entering the workforce until they complete undergraduate studies, and generally until they complete a graduate program. Many parents prefer to send their children abroad to study, spending small fortunes for the prestige of their child holding a foreign degree. This gap between parents of lower education with children of much higher-level education is a phenomenon which may not be seen again in China, at least not on the current scale. Parents of the "80 Hou" were mostly born in the 1960's and entered a new wave of work

force in China. They worked hard and were able to save well. Some came by their wealth by chance. In Beijing many families gained wealth and residential property portfolios after receiving government reimbursement for vacating hutongs (alleyway residential neighborhoods) that were demolished to pave the way for rapid urbanization. The families gained financial security by investing the money received as reimbursement into new apartments and housing around Beijing and becoming professional landlords. This provides a nice inheritance for the “80 Hou”, who gain financial security with little effort and often never need to work. Families where one or both parents work for the government are generally very financially secure, and considered by many to be “wealthy”. Many “80 Hou” that study and travel extensively abroad are children of these parents.

However the family has acquired wealth, they use it to dote on their only child. This has influenced several factors that will affect the leaders of tomorrow.

## CHAPTER 2

### HYPOTHESIS

Given that the generation known collectively as “80 Hou” is estimated at over 100 million strong, and have great access to education and travel, I hypothesize that the influence of the “80 Hou” on the perception of China and Chinese culture will continue to rise and dominate a large portion of the world’s image of China. Furthermore, the existence of the one-child policy in China since 1979 has created a social and population ratio crisis in China that will shape the future of the CCP.



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

Research beyond the literature review was conducted mainly as an interview process. First Chinese in the age bracket of the “80 Hou” generation (specifically those born after 1980) were identified and then interviewed to determine their perception of themselves (wealthy, poor, “little emperor, etc.). Then colleagues of those Chinese were interviewed to determine their impression of them, and their overall impression of Chinese culture. Chinese participants were asked a series of six questions. They included: Where are you from? What is your age? What are you parents’ occupations? Do you consider your family wealthy, middleclass, or poor? How would you define the term “little emperor”? Do you think you fall in the category of a “little emperor”? Questions asked the non-Chinese surveyed were: Where are you from? What is your age? How do you know any Chinese people? What is your impression of the Chinese people you know? What is your impression of Chinese culture overall? Have you heard of the term “little emperor”? What will China’s future be like?

## CHAPTER 4

### LITTLE EMPERORS NOT COMPREHENSIVE OF ALL 80 HOU

In contrast to this smaller demographic of the “80 Hou”, the majority do not come from the large cities, but from rural China. These “80 Hou” embrace a more traditional Confucian ideology. They are saddled with more traditional responsibilities as well. They must participate in supporting the family and as the only child have no siblings to assist them. Many move to the city for work so they can send money back to their families. There, ironically, they face overrated housing costs and a much higher cost of living. According to government figures urban disposable incomes averaged 17,175 renminbi per capita and 5,153 RMB per capita in the countryside in 2009 (Tatlow 2010). The irony lies in the fact that their landlords are their urban “80 Hou” contemporaries or perhaps the parents of their contemporaries. Even in the face of many frustrations, these Chinese youths continue to strive, taking night classes and working to improve their job status to provide better lives for themselves and their families.

## CHAPTER 5

### PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

“NEET” is a perception of young adults neither in education, employment, or training. NEET was first introduced as a widespread concern in United Kingdom around 1997. But in recent years, China has adapted this term, and gave NEET a new Chinese name- Ken Lao Zu (啃老族). If translated literally, “ken” means “to bite”, “lao” means “the elder”, “zu” means “a group”. So “Ken Lao Zu” means a group of people that live on their elders’ assets. During the interviews conducted for this paper, the young 80 hours I interviewed mentioned this term frequently, and most of them revealed a concern of becoming a NEET in the future, which means they neither want to be unemployed /uneducated, or socially excluded.

Unemployment has become one of China’s biggest social problems in recent years. Persistent unemployment makes young people’s transition to adulthood difficult, increases their chances of being poor in the future and their risk of engaging in problem behaviors, as well as reduces their social and political involvement (Bay & Blekesaune, 2002; Hagquist, 1998; Hammer, 2007; Isengard, 2003).

During the interviews conducted with Chinese college students, they kept revealing concerns of becoming ken lao zu. In their opinion, the perception of a NEET was just a derivative of becoming a “little emperor”. In fact, the NEETs are

a very diverse group representing different generations from different social backgrounds. They can be people who are long-term unemployed, temporarily unemployed, unemployed for illness, childcare or family duties, unemployed to prepare for higher education or for examinations of all kinds. For those who have parental economic support and with “legitimate” reasons of being unemployed, being jobless is not much of an economic problem. The NEET condition is a problem because most people believe when a young person is doing nothing; their adjustment to adult life will be more difficult (Chen).

One of the most deleterious effects of the policy that has led to the creation of the “80 Hou” is the imbalance of males to females in China. Unverified estimates suggest there are currently 32-35 million more males than females in China. Three factors responsible for China’s unbalanced sex ratios include sex-selected abortion, female infanticide and abandonment, and unreported female birth (White 2006). The use of ultrasound technology for fetal sex identification and to identify possible birth defects led to an increase of abortions (Shao and Herbig 1994). Figures on abandonment at the national level are lacking but some estimates from local levels suggest 4.5% of babies, mostly female, are abandoned (Yat-ming 1998). In 2000 it was reported that there was an estimated 40.6 million missing women in China (Hudson and den Boer 2002).

Since the implementation of the one child policy the sex ratio of newborn boys to girls rose from 108.5 in 1985 to 119 in 2005. Sex ratios higher than 125 were found in 99 cities (BBC 2006). Many rural areas are full of men of marriage age but void of eligible females (Reynolds 2007). This is on course to continually

increase in disparity, leaving a possibly insurmountable gender gap in China in the future.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

During the interviews, a total of 15 Chinese students and 10 Non-Chinese students were interviewed from the ages from 18 to 24. The age group from 18-22 years old is the students still in college, studying for their bachelor degree. The age group from 22-24 is the students in graduate school; either achieving their master or PhD.

For the Chinese students, personal interviews were conducted after they filled out questionnaires with such questions as: Where are you from? What is your age? What are you parents' occupations? Do you consider your family wealthy, middleclass, or poor? How would you define the term "little emperor"? Do you think you fall in the category of a "little emperor"? After the Chinese interviewee finished the questionnaire, I asked them to explain some of the answers they put on the questionnaire and why they think that way. The Non-Chinese students questionnaires contained questions like: What's your name? What is your occupation? What's your nationality? How do you describe your Chinese friends? How did you get to know your Chinese friends?

After finishing 23 interviews with the students, I surmise that the Chinese students studying abroad can be divided into two groups. The first group is mostly undergraduate students that came to study here through an "agency". Study abroad agencies in China are a fast growing industry helping high school students apply to overseas schools. These students don't need to do any preparation, only wait for the agency to tell them which school accepted them.

Their parents pay for the agency if the student is accepted. The second group is mostly graduate or PhD students. They generally finished their college education in China, and continued their PhD study in the United States. This second group, unlike the first group, didn't use an agency as part of their application process. They took TOEFL and GRE and worked through the materials on their own. So generally speaking, the second group is older, more experienced and they didn't come to the states on their family's wealth.

During the interview to the first group of Chinese students, 90% percent of the students consider their family as middle-class families, and around 80% of them didn't choose to come to the states themselves. Instead their parents wanted them to. And with the help of the agencies, the students were accepted by the universities. For the answer of the third question "How do you define 'little emperor'?" the students surprisingly had similar answers. They described their impression of a little emperor as someone dependent, lack of self-discipline, and a huge money spender. Some of them even took an example saying little emperor are materialistic and no matter how expensive if they feel they must have their parents should pay. But surprisingly none of the interviewees considered themselves as a little emperor. They considered that little emperors were a rare group and only apply to extreme cases.

On the other hand, the older student group thought of themselves as self-absorbed little emperors in a way sometimes. They pointed that they were the only children in the family and they had unreasonable demands during their entire childhood. They also made comments that the little emperor trend would

be harmful for the future youngsters. They said although they made their own decisions came abroad with scholarships and funding from the foreign schools; their families weren't poor and agreed to give them extra financial supports.

The result from the foreign student group also gives a different perspective on this survey. Most of them mentioned that they knew China had one child policy in the 70's, but after discovering their Chinese friends' consumer habits here, they were still very surprised. They had observed that the Chinese students use their parents' credit cards to buy various expensive products; at the same time they also observe that the Chinese friends are very generous with friends in terms of buying gift to their friends, etc. The foreign student group commented that the young 80 hou Chinese friends they met broke the old impression they had on China and Chinese people. China as a country they grow a very strong materialism and consumerism within their young generations.

Based on all the research above, with my understanding of the young Chinese generations, I decided to make a research project that focus on the identities seeking between generations, then I narrowed my focus between my grandparents and myself. My grandfather was born on February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1925 to a family of Beijing landowners. His parents named him Qingqi, and his last name was Yang. His father, Yang Qingtao, was one of the bigger landowners in his area and hired a lot of workers for his farm. He owned around 30 houses and a lot of land, which meant his family, was very wealthy at that time. My grandfather's mother's family name was Deng. My grandfather had three brothers. Yang Qingxiang is my grandfather's oldest brother, and the one he is



closest to. He is 90 years old now and has lived in Beijing all of his life. I have only seen him twice in my life. My grandfather's second oldest brother, Qing You, lived in Shenyang and passed away last year. The youngest brother, Qing Zhi, is about 15 years younger than my grandfather and also lives in Shenyang. I met him only once in Chengdu when I was 12. After the opium war of 1840, China gradually changed into a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. On July 7th, 1937, the Marco Polo Bridge Incident happened, which was at the beginning of World War II in Asia. Within days, Japan launched a full-scale invasion of China. One month later, the Japanese invaded Beijing. After that, my grandfather lived with his Aunt for over a year. During this time, he continued his education in Beijing Yucai School. In 1942 he enrolled in Fu Ren university high school but later dropped out. The two most influential men in china at that time were Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the KMT nationalist party, and Mao Zedong, the lead of the communist CPC. When the Japanese began its invasion in 1936 it interrupted China's civil war of 9 years. Instead of continuing to fight with each other, Mao and Chiang formed a Second United Front to focus their fighting against the Japanese. As a 17-year-old boy, my grandfather was struggling under the frustration of living on his own land but under the control of the Japanese. The lessons he took from high school instilled a strong sense of patriotism in him. He decided to leave Beijing and join the resistance. On January 6<sup>th</sup>, 1943, after having his last picture taken with his best friend Qifeng, grandfather stepped on a train to Linfeng, Shanxi province. Only two people in the family had been informed of his decision, his mother and big brother

Qingxiang. After grandfather arrived in Shanxi, he met up with his cousin Wang Tong. Wang Tong worked as a communist undercover spy in the Japanese army. For a month my grandfather stayed at his cousin's house waiting for a letter from the underground CCP. One day, Wang Tong walked in with the letter. The next day, as he was instructed to do in the letter, grandfather left for a restaurant to meet a man wearing a traditional long robe and holding an Asashi Shimbun newspaper. After exchanging information, grandfather and Mr. Zhou sat down to plan how they could cross the Japanese area to Yan'An.

After crossing the Japanese danger zone, my grandfather arrived at the communist base in Yan'An, and joined the communist army under a different name to separate himself from his family. At first things went well for my grandfather. Later, though, things changed. Suspicion swept through the party, and he found himself under investigation and suspected of being a Japanese spy. My grandfather spent 6 months under investigation. The investigation originated from his association with his cousin Wang Tong, who was undercover in the Japanese army. My grandfather admitted that there was a time he thought about quitting, but he believed the truth would come out, so he stayed in Yan'An until the party found that he was innocent.

After overcoming this obstacle he knew nothing could stop him from serving his country. He later graduated from the Anti-Japanese University and worked for the Communist Propaganda department. In 1950, he met my grandmother.

After grandparent got married, they raised 4 children happily together. At the same time, Chinese is experiencing a huge economic reform. And for most Chinese, life is improving, including my grandparents. My grandfather kept getting promotions in the air force until 1969 he got thrown into jail during the Cultural Revolution. According to this general story I made this research documentary called "Any Other Name", a documentary recounting a Chinese family saga of identities through generations. My future plan about this documentary involves submitting to different documentary film festivals and creating on-line web pages. I would also like to present this documentary to different Chinese-American communities and foundations.

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